

Cops check in: Evansville police make calls to elderly residents

By [GINA DUWE](#) ([Contact](#)) Sunday, Nov. 15, 2009



Photo by [Kyle Bursaw](#)

Some elderly Evansville residents, such as 91-year-old Irene Higginbotham, look forward to and appreciate calls from the Evansville Police Department to check on their welfare.



Photo by [Kyle Bursaw](#)

Jill Puckett, secretary at the Evansville Police Department, makes calls to a few elderly Evansville residents each morning to check on their welfare.

EVANSVILLE ô As a summer storm swept through Irene Higginbotham's neighborhood awhile back, lightning knocked out her phone line.

Unable to receive or make calls, she was stuck.

At age 91, she is confined to her Evansville home.

"My goodness, I didn't know what to do," she said. "I watched for somebody to walk down the street, but the street was so empty."

Pretty soon, she said, a police officer walked up to her door.

"I'm so glad to see you," she told him.

The officer was checking on her because the police department couldn't reach Higginbotham during its morning call to her.

Higginbotham is one of a handful of residents who receive a phone call each morning from the police department.

The department calls them "RUOK" calls, and they're the epitome of small-town life.

Jill Puckett, the department's secretary, makes the calls each weekday morning. Officers call on weekends.

The goal is to make sure older residents are OK, but the calls turn into daily conversations.

"They usually talk about the weather," Puckett said. "A few minutes about what's going on in their familyô if they had a recent great-grandchild or if their family is coming to visitô what they've had for breakfast, their medical problems í "

Four residents receive daily calls. A fifth receives a call on Sundays.

"It just puts you in touch with the outside world even though you're alone because the family is all working," Higginbotham said. "It just gives you a sense of security."

If nobody answers, the department calls an emergency contact such as a family member or neighbor. If the contact hasn't heard from the person, either, an officer stops by.

Higginbotham has gotten to know the officersô she calls them "a great bunch of guys"ô over the last couple years as she dealt with health problems.

No matter how busy people are at the police station, she said, "they always make you feel welcome and that it's not an imposition in any way that they call you."

Officer Patrick Reese can rattle off each resident's name and details about them— what they like to talk about, what makes them special and what to expect with each one.

One woman is real sweet, he said, but sometimes does laundry when she's supposed to be answering their calls. One man enjoys polka music and sent Puckett a CD of polka songs.

"He asks the weather forecast every day when we call," Reese said.

Puckett punches out the phone numbers from memory every day and has even called them from her cell phone on days off, Reese said. Reese recalls one day when Puckett left for an appointment but forgot to tell an officer to make the calls. She did all the "RUOK" calls on her way to her appointment.

"Jill has literally called some of these people everyday for years," Reese said. "Many times, she talks to them more than their own family."

Puckett knows or recognizes two of the people she calls every day, but "the other two I have no idea," she said. "I wouldn't know them if I saw them. It's kind of strange."

On Higginbotham's birthday this year, Puckett, Reese and others in the office gathered around the phone to sing "Happy Birthday."

Higginbotham appreciates the attention.

"I just think it's a wonderful thing that they do," she said.

related STORIES